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Milestones / Miles's Tones: a Coincidence

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Milestones / Miles’s tones: a coincidence

Coincidences happen. The American author Paul Auster, famous for his use of chance states “*There are coincidences and it is impossible to know what to make of them.*”¹ My coincidence occurred when I was asked to be involved in the selection of this show I had just been listening to Miles Davis’s 1958 album *Milestones*. While this record is sometimes overshadowed by his later more famous collection *A Kind of Blue* (1959); *Milestones* is known for its contrasting styles, range of technique and the bringing together of artists, in his case a sextet, who offered a special and unique mix. I hope it is no coincidence that these elements are also present in the *Milestones* exhibition.

In selecting a showcase of work there are many methods one could use. Choose chronologically, selecting representative pieces from each year. Choose one piece by everyone. Look at different print methods and exhibit those. Impose specific thematic threads. What we tried to do was simply look at the work submitted and choose what we felt was the strongest. Perhaps this allowed coincidence to answer some of the questions we had asked ourselves.

Different selectors will no doubt bring their own concerns, interests and influences to the table and of course arrive at different outcomes. No selection is infallible, it is always just a snapshot in time. In this case a snapshot trying to record a snapshot of 25 years of artistic production. When you assemble over 40 artists with diverse practices it might be coincidence that lets us look for connections, shared interests and subject matter. Independent pieces made at different times can seem to run into each other, creating counterpoints and dialogue. Obviously none of this could be intended by the artists, but it does create a context for us to reflect and respond to these relationships. Conceivably it allows us to see how certain themes have changed and evolved; or remained unanswered questions that still need engagement. Themes include visual responses to literature, landscape and space, process led work, self and

¹ Auster, Paul, Interview, *The Art of Hunger*, p 290, Faber and Faber, London, 1997

identity, the extraordinary in the everyday and art as social/political engagement.

The identification of these headings is not intended to be a definitive listing. Rather it is one of many possible readings that we as viewers can make. It is not intended to limit the potential responses to the artists work, or indeed to define the core of their practices, but to offer a framework to discuss the works on show.

The continuing influence of Irish and European literature as a source for visual artworks can be seen from Eamon O'Doherty's 1982 etchings *Ulysses - Cyclops/Citizen* and *Bloom in Nighttown* to Frank Kiely's recent colourful screenprint *Voyage to Honyhuhnmms* 2007, drawn from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Jan de Fouw's detailed etching *Amergin Hawk* was created in response to and reproduced in a recent poetry collection. As well as literature being a source for content the book as an object has proved a rich vein for artists to pursue. In Marie Louise Martin's recent piece *Book of Days – September* we see a series of seven prints, developed from diaries and sketchbooks, threaded together referencing a books narrative and journey. We also receive a sense of Martins artistic journey with the much earlier double portrait etching *Maud & Lottie* highlighting her interest in early Florentine Renaissance art. In Paula Henihan's digital print *My Life*, we see the book used as a ground for an appropriated scientific image of a head and a tree, creating a dialogue between universal empirical sources and our own personal subjective histories. A different dialogue appears in Caroline Byrne's *Procession* a bound and accordion folded linocut on paper. With great delicacy Byrne explores the natural world and its presence in an urban landscape. Byrne's use of animal imagery is also shared with Jane Garland. Garland's composite screenprint *Unspeakable Pursuits* draws from literary traditions of using animals as metaphors for understanding human society. Here the fox is emblematic of nature being excluded from our controlled human order. Similarly in the etchings of Vincent Sheridan, *Motion II* and *Evening Dance* swarming birds are employed to mirror human group dynamics and social behaviour. The frantic motion of the birds is juxtaposed against the calmness of the landscape they travel over.

Landscape and the depiction of space plays a significant and diverse role in many of the pieces presented here. In Cora Cummins' subtle etching *Factory Mountain* landscape and location act as anchors for issues of refuge, a wishing to be elsewhere and the comodification of leisure time. The finely rendered etchings *Tent* and *Hammock* by Colin Martin depict familiar settings and scenes of recreation and leisure where wider narrative themes beyond what is shown

are implied. Barbara Dunne's sensitively balanced etching *Yellow Flower, The Touch, Blue Feather Triptych* is emblematic of her interest in space as an expanded vista, a site for transformation and nurture. Joan Gleeson's two etchings *Moon Shadow* and the recent *Into the Depths* skillfully show her ongoing interest in man's imprint on nature. Jackie Stanley's elegantly structured etching and aquatints *The Palm House* and *Morning Glory* show the shift in her focus to landscape work during this earlier period of her practice. Kate Betts' inventive use of a Turner landscape highlights her concern with dialogically opposed systems of thought. *Hope III - Sky after Turner* a composite etching, presents an expanse of cloud comprised of playing cards individually altered by Betts. Michael Timmins' monochrome print *Mesh Landscape* depicts another type of pictorial space. One that is constructed through an intricate build up of delicate lines over broad stark solid areas. Anthony Lyttle's etchings *Enclosure I* and *Dot II* also deals with elements of landscape, specifically its containment, division and transitional states. Equally in Stephen Vaughan's work there is an interest in deriving marks and systems from architectural forms. *Juggernaut* an etching and screenprint contrasts organic forms with geometric shapes alluding to the imposition of man in the natural world. Transitional states might also be, by coincidence, referred to in Paki Smith's etching *Wildman Burns the City*. In his biographical piece for this catalogue Smith mentions the studio fire in 1987, perhaps, one might suppose an image that could have inspired this piece.

However it is the construction of buildings and the imposed order on our environment that inform Piia Rossi's *Paper Houses*. These three dimensional monoprints constructed to depict familiar yet anonymous places are made to relate to each other, allowing us to imagine a utopian or dystopian world they could occupy. Her exploration of the three dimensional properties of print is also investigated in the work of Andrew Folan. Folan's practice has constantly sought innovative forms for print, combining new technology with traditional techniques. His investigation is seen in the range of work here, from the three dimensional *Parcel Constrained by its Image, Surface Dwelling* to *Love Heart 3*. He allows collaboration in architecture, medicine and science to inform his own practice. Likewise Fiona McDonald draws on her background in chemistry, to influence and define much of the outcomes in her print work. Scientific like investigations into alternative methods of etching plates produces extraordinary results as seen in *Merging Waterlines* and *Untitled – Grey/White*.

The centrality of process is evidenced in *Even*, an etched-lino print by Alison Pilkington. Pilkington has specialized in this particular print form as it acts as an appropriate medium to retain the painterly qualities within her interdisciplinary practice. In Mary Fitzgerald's *Embedded Blue* we can see her

interest in the properties and potential of drawing. There is also a sophisticated questioning of the production of meaning initially through the placement of elements within a composition, then the further placing of the artwork in the public arena. Strong associations with drawing can also be found in Aida Bangoura's *It Doesn't Count* and *It Doesn't Count 1*. A range of dynamic hand-made marks are used, describing systems of time, fragments of writing, numbers suggesting calendars combine to give a sense of presence and disappearance. The use of supposed analytical imagery is also seen in the delicate and dreamlike etchings *Untitled* and *Butterfly Net* by Elaine Leader. Leader draws on a wide variety of sources, including botanical illustration and maps to populate her work. Each element contributes to her overall questioning of a sense of self in a changing world.

Self and identity is also examined by other artists in this exhibition. Catherine Lynch's vivid *Untitled IV* silkscreen on cotton showing multiple figures against a patterned background refers to the choices that women make in relation to their domestic and work life. Louise Peat's screen print *Deep Song* shows a naked faceless female figure obscured against a black background suggesting moments of change and flux both physical and psychological. Similarly in Rob Smith's energetic *To Catch a Cat* we see a representative work from a practice that was concerned with an inner search for meaning.

Poet Patrick Kavanagh's dictum to make the ordinary extraordinary unites a diverse range of work. Aoife Dwyer's screenprint *25 Years* details the residual marks of insignificant things, a subtle form of commemoration. Sara Horgan's etching *Love Letter 7* employs an ambiguity at the actual centre of her intriguing print. Framed by a Greek pattern male/female pattern is the heart like image denoting a heart or a pelvis? Is this a physical residue of an emotional experience? Catherine Kelly's striking screenprints *Mother & Child* and *Teresa* reflects her experience and knowledge of her subjects and surroundings. This is comparable in intention to Grainne Dowling's sensitive aquatint *Resting*, demonstrating a skillful response to her circumstances and environment. Margaret O'Brien's wide ranging exploration of everyday objects and activities transformed by a replacement of their actual function is seen in her four screenprints *Woman's work IV*, *C*, *Precious* and *Rubbish*. *Triptych* an etching by Silvia Nevado Roco picks up on the playful qualities in O'Brien's work. She transforms an ordinary chair into a more joyous object than perhaps originally intended. Sinead O'Reilly in her finely rendered etching *The Daydream* also alludes to the everyday with an air of the unusual. Naomi Sex's two atmospheric etchings *Pick up Truck* and *Overhanging Wire* present scenes of the mundane where something of significance may have occurred.

Engagement with the social and political is also a strong undercurrent. Perhaps most explicitly so in Annroi Wyer's provocative screenprint *Viper* juxtaposing a dictionary definition of a viper, a picture of the viper and an image of the then centre of a political storm Oliver North. Dermot Finn's etching *That Men Cannot Learn* acknowledges preceding political printmakers such as Goya and Hogarth while drawing on contemporary media and street art giving his message a contemporary relevance. Equally in Margaret Irwin's etching *Sweet Flower of Youth* current images of warfare are arranged around a poppy motif – a symbol synonymous with the First World War. Janine Davidson in her four etchings from the *Little Devils* series decontextualises motifs and iconography associated with different cultures allowing us to reinterpret their original meaning and create our own. Diverse cultures and notions of the stranger provides a backdrop to Emma Finucane's striking digital print *Disappearing Other*. Finucane engages in the debate of the role of the artist in society and how that position is defined and mediated in a significant way.

In my role as selector I would like to thank the Black Church Print Studio for inviting me to be involved in this project. I would particularly like to thank Hazel Burke for all her help and patience and my fellow selector Andrew

Folan. I hope we have caught a sense of the quality, diversity and endeavour that emerged from the Studio over the past 25 years.

It is said that Miles Davis's *Milestones* provided a platform of experimentation, and technical virtuosity for his future work. Looking at this exhibition I believe that the next 25 years are in very good hands. And that is no coincidence.

Brian Fay is an artist and lecturer in Fine Art at the Dublin Institute of Technology.